

"Getting a Shot at Life" through Group Action Planning

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Rachael and Sarah are the daughters of Van and Rose Schaffer of Lawrence, Kansas. Rachael, three years old, is an outgoing young lady whose eyes twinkle with enthusiasm and self-assurance. Sarah, at 18 months, is a "ham" for any audience. She enjoys musical toys and playing with Rachael or any of the nearly 40 cousins she and Rachael share.

Almost from the day she was born and the initial diagnosis of Down syndrome was made by her family's doctor, Sarah's parents began putting together a network of service providers for her. The Schaffers had a vision from the beginning of Sarah's being a part of the family, the neighborhood, and the community. Van concluded, "We want Sarah to have an equal chance at life – for her to have a shot at all the things others have a shot at. We don't want her to have to live within some set of boundaries just because she has Down syndrome".

The network the Schaffers put together provided very fine services, and Sarah was doing well in the developmental areas those services addressed. The initial challenge, however, was pulling that team together to make sure that "the right hand knew what the left hand was doing."

Group Action Planning is a "hybrid" family support model which includes some of the characteristics of both individualized team planning and support groups. Action Groups are very similar to what an ideal IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan) approach would be; however, they differ significantly from the reality of most IFSP processes (Able-Boone, 1993; Minke, 1991; Turbiville, Turnbull, Garland, & Lee, 1996).

Group Action Planning occurs when family members, friends, and service providers form a reliable alliance with each other for the purpose of creating a synergistic community (Katz, 1984). What do we mean by a synergistic community? A synergistic community is one in which all participants generate increased activity and energy (Craig & Craig, 1974) so that the "whole is greater than the sum of the parts." In such a context, each person's efforts significantly and exponentially advance individual and group goals, as well as enhancing each participant's motivation

and knowledge/skills (Turnbull & Turnbull, in press). Synergistic communities create a different vision about what life can be when one has a disability – a vision characterized by inclusion, contribution, interdependence, and empowerment. The two fundamental characteristics of Action Groups are that they (a) create a context for relationships and interdependent caring and (b) through the relationships and caring, engage in creative problem-solving, enabling participants to get what they want and need (i.e., experience empowerment).

Typically, early intervention tends to be aimed more at child and family change as contrasted to changes in ecological contexts (defined by Bronfenbrenner [1979] as the immediate environment in which the family lives [microsystem], the interaction between those immediate environments [mesosystem], and the larger milieu in which these various environments are embedded [exosystem and macrosystem]). Group Action Planning recognizes that forming "ecological partnerships" across all levels of the child and family's environments will enhance the responsiveness of their ecological contexts. The idea is to build a network of people across all ecological levels who are passionately committed to the child and family. These people include nuclear and extended family, friends, community members, early childhood service providers, and generic community service providers (e.g., Brownie leaders, church school staff, YMCA staff).

The network is brought together to support the child and family in "getting a shot at life." Especially within the field of disability, there has been such an emphasis on professional support from the earliest days and weeks of a child's life that potential support from significant others, including family, friends, and community members, is often overlooked. Although service providers offer necessary and helpful support, they make up only a small aspect of any child or family's full ecology. The more that comprehensive ecological linkages are made from the outset and evolve over time, the more likely it is that the child will "get a shot at life."

With their diverse expertise and membership, Action Groups often change the role of service providers relative to

a family. Unlike many traditional relationships in which professionals have "power-over" families through authoritative control, an ecologically based reliable alliance is characterized as having "power-with" others. In such an alliance, respectful, non judgmental, and ever-available support is shared in relationships that are sustaining for a long period of time. Reliable alliances, characterized by "power-with" relationships, foster collaboration in which all parties are willing, and even eager, to learn from their shared experiences and diverse expertise. Furthermore, "power-with" relationships can lead to "power-from-within," which "...gives a person courage to act when important values are threatened, even if the short-term prospects for success are poor" (Zipperlen & O'Brien, 1993, p. 24).

We will focus on five key components of Group Action Planning:

- (a) inviting support,
- (b) creating connections,
- (c) envisioning great expectations,
- (d) solving problems, and
- (e) celebrating progress.

Action Groups have been used much more frequently with elementary/secondary students and adults (as contrasted to infants and toddlers) both in the literature and in our own experience (Falvey, Forrest, Pearpoint & Rosenberg 1994; O'Brien & Lovett, 1992; Stineman, Morningstar, Bishop, & Turnbull, 1993; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996). Although we have conducted many Action Groups with older students and families, we are in the preliminary phase of Action Groups with families with infants or toddlers, such as the Schaffer family (just three "gatherings" so far). Throughout the paper, we will illustrate the components of Action Groups by highlighting the Schaffers' experiences and predicting the evolutionary composition and focus of their Action Group in the coming years.

Inviting support

Unfortunately, many families of children with disabilities have smaller social support networks than other families. Indeed, they sometimes get their only support from nuclear and extended family members (Herman & Thompson, 1995; Kazak & Marvin, 1984). Even nuclear and extended family support is often difficult. In a quantitative study of 17 families, all of whom had a child with a disability coupled with problem behavior, most parents described many nuclear family challenges. Sibling relationships characterized by feelings of resentment, embarrassment, and frustration were particularly difficult. Approximately half of the families commented on the difficulty of establishing comfortable and connected relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins (Turnbull & Ruef, in press).



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In addition to difficulty with family relationships, over two-thirds of the families reported that their children, whose ages ranged from 4 to 35, lacked even a single friendship. Clearly, forming relationships with significant others, even within the microsystem, is a major challenge for many families whose children have a disability.

Typically, families with a child with a disability feel most comfortable in inviting members of the mesosystem – primarily professionals who work with the child – to be charter Action Group members. Many families find it easier to rely on professionals than to foster emotionally connected relationships between the child and members of the nuclear and extended family, neighbors with whom they live in close proximity, or community members who can be instrumental in accessing inclusive settings and opportunities.

When she's a little older, we might invite one or two of her friends – her buddies – who would be in school or activities with her. For now, we want those most involved in her education or caregiving to come. – Van Schaffer

As Action Groups begin to address significant barriers to the actualization of visions (e.g., locating an inclusive preschool, attending the children's program at one's church or synagogue, taking classes at the local YMCA), community members who can help ensure that these opportunities are available and who represent membership in the exo-, meso-, and macrosystems can be invited to participate.

Parents often need support as they prepare to issue invitations to participate in an Action Group; many families of children with disabilities feel that they should not "impose" their "problems" on others. A professional might offer to serve as the facilitator of the Action Group and to support the parents in inviting others to participate or in

issuing invitations themselves. Specific steps that might be taken in inviting support include:

- Identifying a facilitator who has keen skills related to emotionally-connected communication and systematic, creative problem solving;
- Given the priority issues that need to be addressed, determining who can help with those particular problems and issuing invitations to these people for Action Group participation;
- Supporting families in knowing how to reach out for assistance by devising and practicing "invitational scripts" and even role-playing extending invitations, to encourage family members to be comfortable with seeking support;
- Encouraging families to recognize that there are reciprocal benefits for people who participate in Action Groups – the family will not be obligated or "in debt" to them;
- Connecting families with veteran families who have invited support successfully so they can share what has worked for them.

Identifying the service providers for the gathering was fairly easy. They had been working with Sarah and her family for some time. Everyone was personally invited to come to the gathering. These invitations were followed by a hand-written invitation.

Sarah's "gathering", as we've come to refer to our Action Group, has 10-15 people. It is somewhat enlarged because, since some of her providers are graduate students in speech-language pathology at The University of Kansas, meetings include their supervisor (Jane) as well as the students (Matt and Andria). Three members of the daycare program attend including the director (Shelly), Sarah's current teacher (Tracy), and her next teacher (Lance) from the toddler room. Her occupational therapist (Kay), early childhood educator (Dena), and Parents as Teachers educator (Gayle) also attend. In addition to the service providers, Sarah's gathering includes her aunt (Mary, Rose's sister) and the mother of another child who has a disability (Ann). The family service coordinators (Kay C. and Vicki) facilitate the gathering, including inviting many of the members.

Rose is thinking that a nurse practitioner from their pediatrician's office should be invited to attend. "She could keep the doctor better informed of what is happening for Sarah and also give him an idea of what he could suggest for other families. He has told a number of families about using sign language with their children because of Sarah's success with it. This would be something else he could let them know about."

For Sarah's family, inviting support involved surmounting several barriers. The first was time - many of these people have irregular schedules, and time "playing phone tag" was substantial. Van described another barrier: "I don't know how you get this group to come together. If we tried to do this alone without Vicki and Kay's assistance, encouragement, and positive thinking, I don't think anyone

would have come." In fact, people are excited about coming and are committed to Sarah and the vision for her life. Families deserve affirmation in knowing they are not "burdening others."

To accommodate everyone, recognizing that all members also have families, Sarah's gatherings begin at 5:15 p.m. This timing means that many participants are asked to extend their working day rather than give up an evening. Some participants can adjust their hours and go to work later on the day of a gathering; others are "giving" their time as a part of their commitment to Sarah and her family.

Part H funds have also been approved for paying for the time of some members who are participating under the "family training" early intervention service category. Gayle (Parents as Teachers educator) comments, "We should prepare more people to do IFSPs like this one - a gathering. I've been to too many where people sit on opposite sides of the table, depending whether you are the parents or providers. Sometimes it's difficult for me to decide on which side of the table I belong!"

Creating connections

Inviting people into the group accomplishes the prerequisite task of physical presence; however, forming the bonds of a reliable alliance among those people is a key to establishing a synergistic community. Creating connections is consistent with Maslow's theory of human motivation, which underscores the need to experience belonging as a prerequisite to meeting needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualization, at higher levels (Maslow, 1970).

A key component of creating connections is strengthening the emotional and social connections between and among group members and the child and family. When children have severe disabilities and require augmentative communication, it is especially important for others to know how to get on the child's "wavelength." A natural learning opportunity is provided when the child who is the focus of planning is present at the Action Group meetings and has a chance to interact with the participants. Some strategies to accomplish connections with the child include:

- Modeling and sharing by people who already have emotionally connected relationships with the child, so that others learn how to make a special connection;
- Reflecting on the child's cues for expressing preferences, pleasure, and displeasure and responding to those cues;
- Sharing stories about the positive way that the child and family contribute to others in the group;
- Reflecting on difficult experiences in connecting with the child and engaging in creative problem solving to overcome those difficulties.

In contrast to the somber ambience of many individualized team meetings and parent support groups, Action Groups particularly seek to infuse social frivolity and just plain fun into relationships. Some strategies for accom-

plishing connections among participants include:

- Holding meetings in comfortable settings such as the family's home or a favorite neighborhood location;
- Serving food and allowing time for comfortable visiting;
- Celebrating all group members' birthdays, holidays, and special occasions;
- Infusing humor, laughter, and warmth into the ongoing conversations and problem-solving sessions; and
- Making personal disclosures of feelings related to issues being discussed, as well as concentrating on "facts."

Sarah always is present at the gatherings. One of the first things done at the first gathering was to have everyone talk about the things they really enjoy about Sarah. Some of the qualities people mentioned were her sense of humor, her persistence, and her self-confidence.

Sarah's communication currently includes the use of signing. Her big smile and her kisses, however, communicate with everyone whether they are able to sign with her or not. There are many members who know her signs; they are quick to interpret them for those who don't and to model signs everyone can use with her. Everyone is comfortable with the signs, because few are proficient and all are learning together.

Rachael is usually with a baby-sitter upstairs. She is not left out of the fun of the evening, however, because usually at least one child of one of the members of the gathering comes along. One night, Dena's son came to the gathering and on another evening, Margaret, Ann's daughter came. Now that it is warmer, the members of the gathering can hear the voices of the children playing in the yard; these remind us that soon, as she gets a little older and a little more mobile, Sarah will be out playing with other children rather than being the center of attention of our gathering. Connections are being made everywhere!

At one gathering, Sarah, with her instincts as a "ham," took center stage with her rendition of the "peanut song" (taught to her by Rachael). Some of the members of the gathering joined in the song, using words, signs, or both. Those who didn't join in applauded when she finished. The song was a wonderful glimpse of this little girl and what joy she brings to those around her. Another glimpse of the child known as Sarah was given when she attempted to pull herself to standing in order to reach the bagels and cream cheese set out for munching during the gathering. The group observed that bagels could be used in other settings to get Sarah interested in standing up independently!

The framework for Sarah's gatherings was established at the first meeting when everyone introduced himself or herself - some members had never met - and then described their own families, so that we knew each other as more than "the occupational therapist from Visiting Nurses" or as "the family services coordinator from the Beach Center." Each person also listed the three most important things in their lives. Family, friends, and productive work

were repeatedly emphasized. These were important to each group member and also as components of our visions for Sarah's life.

The group meets in the family room of the Schaffers' home. Everyone, including Sarah, sits around, visits, and swaps stories as the gathering begins. There's food - pizza, bagels, sodas - and lots of laughter.

Great expectations

Successful businesses have long ago mastered the catalytic power of vision:

If any one idea about leadership has inspired organizations for thousands of years, it's the capacity to hold the shared picture of the future we seek to create.

The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared "pictures of the future" that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance. In mastering this discipline, leaders learn the counterproductiveness of trying to dictate a vision, no matter how heartfelt. (Senge, 1990, p. 9)

Conventional wisdom once held that being "realistic" about one's unfortunate circumstances was the hallmark of good mental health (Snyder, 1994). More recent writers, however, offer a different perspective, pointing out the advantages of a sense of optimism, hope, and vision over a narrowly defined "realism." Taylor (1989) notes:

Overall, the research evidence indicates that self-enhancement, exaggerated beliefs in control, and unrealistic optimism typically lead to higher motivation, greater persistence at tasks, more effective performance, and, ultimately, greater success. A chief value of these illusions may be that they help to create self-fulfilling prophecies. They may lead people to try harder in situations that are objectively difficult. Although some failure is certainly inevitable, ultimately the illusions will lead to success more often than will lack of persistence. (Taylor, 1989, p. 64)

Action Groups can foster great expectations in many ways, leading to new and empowering future visions. Some of these include:

- Affirming the child's strengths and projecting future scenarios that those strengths can create;
- Affirming the positive contributions that the child makes to group members (Summers, Behr, & Turnbull, 1989);
- Sharing stories of older children, youth, and adults with a similar disability who have been successful in accomplishing their priorities (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1993);
- Inviting parents of older children and youth with a similar disability to participate in the group and to share their "veteran" success (Santelli, Turnbull, Marquis, & Lerner, 1995);
- Fostering creative thinking characterized by a "what if" orientation rather than "yes buts"; and an "if we" orientation rather than "if only."

Great expectations can fuel hope and energy, leading to

both stronger reliable alliances and more synergistic communities (Turnbull & Turnbull, in press). When people feel that they are not alone and when partners are reliable allies with each other over the short and long haul, families and other group members perceive opportunities once believed to be "unrealistic" as within their power to influence.

Van and Rose are quick to point out, "It [the Action Group] helps us see more opportunities for her. There is such a sharing of ideas; each person sees something different, and we can use those ideas to plan for where we are going – today and in the future.

The group has one global great expectation for Sarah – that she will "have her shot" in her family, neighborhood, and community. A more specific vision is gradually being articulated. Van, Rose, and every participant are experiencing firsthand the catalytic power of shared visions – not for a life of "services," but for a future of playmates, birthday parties, sleep-overs and teenage telephone problems. Now Sarah's closest friend is Rachael, but in the years ahead there will be schoolmates, friends from the church, or Brownies. Sarah's productive role in life will start with her responsibilities in the family, to herself and to other members of the family. It will include helping with household chores or family projects, having collections and hobbies, and developing unique skills or talents that are rewarding to her both personally and socially. Later, she will have work that will be satisfying to her personally and provide the resources to meet her daily needs. Finally, the vision includes Sarah within a network of people who know her and in a community where her contributions and personal characteristics have long ago overpowered any "disability."

This is the visionary "Sarah". This vision will not be achieved by sitting back and having traditional expectations and receiving traditional services that are typically considered to be "realistic" for children with Down syndrome. Realizing the vision will involve working together and thinking creatively – but what a life it will be!

Members of Sarah's gathering also imagined a "nightmare vision." The nightmare was of Van and Rose standing at the brick walls of their neighborhood school, trying to break down that wall alone. Asked to create a vision from that nightmare, the group pictured Van and Rose, again at the wall, but this time together with all of us from their gathering, with the brick walls fading to open doors.

Of course, there are years before Sarah reaches kindergarten age. But it takes years for micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems to change. In addition to Sarah's continued enrollment in the day care program and her routine family get-togethers with 40+ cousins, the members of the gathering will work to achieve expectations for her in other environments and experiences of early childhood. Swimming lessons, Sunday school, play groups, family vacations, "tag-alongs"

with parents and old brothers or sisters, and trips to the Dairy Queen are part of growing up for young children. We expect that Sarah will enjoy all of these and more.

As the members of the gathering work together, our expectations will grow. Our current expectations are that Sarah will be included in the toddler room at her daycare center, that she will walk and run, that she will talk, and that she'll go to kindergarten. Bring together 15 emotionally connected people into a synergistic context, and who knows what can grow out of it? We're early in our thinking together; and once we're on a roll, our expectations will grow and challenge each and everyone of us to act with Sarah, her family and each other.

Solving problems

Problem resolution is a key aspect of Group Action Planning—it connotes the "action" portion of this process. Having a reliable alliance with group members is not an end in itself, but rather a means to translate visions into reality.

Many support groups are able to take little action because their structure does not include a systematic problem-solving process. Action Groups incorporate this process through the role of the group facilitator, who skillfully (but with a light touch) moves the group through the steps of (a) identifying and prioritizing child and family needs, (b) creatively brainstorming a broad range of options, (c) evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of options and selecting the most appropriate one to implement, (d) developing a specific plan for assigning responsibilities and creating timelines, (e) implementing the plan, and (f) evaluating the outcomes (Knackendoffel, Robinson, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1992; Shank & Turnbull, 1993).

Although many support groups and early intervention programs focus solely on individual and family skill development, Group Action Planning gives just as much emphasis to ecological change. For great expectations to come true, it may be more necessary for the environment to change than for the individual and/or family to learn new skills. Specific problem-solving strategies used in Action Groups include:

- Having a facilitator who has refined skills in the problem-solving process and in facilitating discussion so that positive relationships are fostered among all group members;
- Proceeding through the steps of problem solving, incorporating the expertise and resources of every group member;
- Recognizing when guests need to be invited to the Action Group to help solve a particular ecological problem (e.g., the principal of Sarah's neighborhood school is invited to attend to brainstorm about the supports that need to be put into place so that Sarah can most successfully be welcomed into the school);
- Distributing the responsibility for follow-up tasks among all group members so that no one is overwhelmed;

- Sending out a "to-do list of next steps" about a week after the meeting, outlining tasks what each person will accomplish prior to the next meeting;

Four Levels of Ecological Partnerships

1. Microsystem impact – influencing settings in which the majority of the activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships of the child and family occur (e.g., at home with siblings and extended family; within neighborhood with peers and babysitter).
2. Mesosystem impact – influencing interactive environments in which the child and family participate (e.g., home and early intervention programs; home and YMCA; home and church/synagogue; home and parents' workplace).
3. Exosystem impact – influencing settings that strongly impact the child and family but which they do not actively participate (e.g., the city parks and recreation department offers numerous opportunities for young children to participate in recreation, but almost all of the activities are not accessible to a child with a severe disability; community preschools that do not provide inclusive opportunities for children with disabilities).
4. Macrosystem impact – influencing community values (e.g., community leaders who most strongly shape community opinion regarding respect for diverse populations; feature editors from the local newspaper; members of the school board).

- Monitoring follow-up to ensure that consistent progress is made from one meeting to another, with each person needing to complete only one or two tasks;
- Reviewing the "to-do list" from the previous meeting at the subsequent meeting so that all group members are accountable for accomplishing and reporting on their progress.

One of the key tasks of the group is to model, practice, and refine problem-solving skills so that everyone becomes more competent in this domain. Including a broad array of stakeholders with diverse expertise enriches the brainstorming phase of problem-solving. Communication skills can grow and flourish within Action Groups. When people perceive that they do have genuinely reliable allies in problem-solving, the group experiences a tremendous surge of hope, energy, and persistence.

In Sarah's child care program, children between 14 and 18 months of age routinely transition from the infant room to the toddler room once they begin to walk. Sarah may not reach that milestone within that age window. Van and Rose were distressed that she would have to remain in the infant room beyond the usual time frame and see the children she knew as friends move out of her area. When the issue came up at the gathering, Shelly, the director of the child care program, was quick to say that Sarah could "move up" whenever it

seemed appropriate if she could manage the older room safely (not get trampled!) If all the other toddlers are walking, is Sarah more likely to be stepped on or to be encouraged to get up and walk out of the way, since everyone is modeling walking for her? This discussion illustrates how Action Groups work on environmental change rather than assuming that the child has to conform to traditional requirements (e.g., achieving the specific developmental milestone of "toddling" in order to join the toddler group.)

The members of Sarah's gathering went to work to come up with a way to try out the new setting while not upsetting the child-teacher ratio required for the room by the state child care licensing agency. What seemed best was for Sarah's speech-language therapist (Matt) to take her to the toddler room and use this setting as the environment for his therapy with her. The new room would provide many new things to talk about; at the same time, Matt would provide support for staff in the use of signing, model signing for the other children, and maintain the ratio of children to adults.

Later, Lance, the toddler room teacher, asked the Action Group for more problem solving, because he had not been in the room when Sarah, Matt, and Jane, Matt's supervisor, visited. The plan was then revised so that one day a week Matt and Jane go to the child care center when Lance is working. This way Lance can get to know Sarah better, although he says, "I'm ready now," and Sarah already knows and uses his name sign!

Issues that may arise as the Action Group members work toward their vision for Sarah include: 1) how to provide transdisciplinary services as her skills increase and diverge along more traditionally separated developmental domains; 2) how to facilitate Sarah's inclusion in settings other than home and child care; and 3) how to balance the family's focus so that all family members can achieve their individual as well as family goals.

Rose recognizes the Action Group's powerful support. "We met with the staff of the day care the other day about Sarah's transition to the toddler room. It was so nice to be able to say [when some issues were raised], 'Let's take it to the group meeting.' We can bring the question to the group meeting to talk about the best way to go."

Celebrating progress

Especially when significant individual and ecological change is needed, families often feel overwhelmed by the tasks yet to be accomplished. When this happens, team meetings and support groups tend to focus only on needs and problems rather than offering genuine opportunities to celebrate progress. An essential and defining feature of Group Action Planning is incorporating celebration on a frequent basis.

There are many different ways to celebrate progress, including:

- Affirming at each meeting the steps that have been made

in problem-solving to resolve significant child and family needs;

- Celebrating milestones such as the 6-month anniversary of being included in a neighborhood play group or a one-month anniversary of attending the church preschool;
- Having "we've come a long way, baby" conversations to compare the opportunities for the child and family when the group started to the current situation (Wills, 1987);



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- Having parties, ceremonies, and rituals for acknowledging the reliable alliance that has been mutually formed and the progress that is being made;
- Celebrating the special occasions in the lives of every group member and genuinely extending care and empathy during the joys and sorrows that they experience;
- Seeking opportunities to enhance the self-efficacy of each group member by focusing on their unique contribution to the Action Group.

Celebration is a catalyst for forming synergistic communities, because it can reduce the stress associated with the hard work of problem-solving and foster a sense of collective and mutual empowerment. Celebration often renews energy and, therefore, can lead to greater persistence over time.

Celebrating progress is easy in this gathering. Sarah is doing well; she has a signing vocabulary of 75+ words, uses some couplets, and pulls herself to standing without help. She has also created her own home signs, including one for trouble! Her family is doing well; Rachael enjoys pre-school with lots of friends and teaches signing to any child or adult

she encounters. Van and Rose feel good about the progress both girls are making.

The members of the gathering also celebrate each other's progress toward their goals – the big ones (Matt has been accepted for graduate school at the University of Arizona) and the small ones (Dena got herself and her family all dressed and out the door at the same time one day last week!)

We're looking forward to future celebrations also. Sarah is going to walk; Kay showed everyone how to facilitate her progress toward those first steps. She's also going to talk; Ann demonstrated games she had used to interest her daughter in vocalizing. She suggested a variation on "singing in the shower" – tapping the "robust acoustic qualities" of the shower and also vocalizing into an inflated balloon, held on her lap for the tactile feedback from the balloon's resonance of the sounds.

Other celebrations can be visualized. Sarah is going to take swimming lessons with kids her own age. She enjoys swimming with Rose now, but think of our celebration when she floats independently! Given the way children are rushed to competition in our culture, there probably will be a community floating contest. She's got a head start on winning!

Team members will progress, too. We'll all get better at sharing our expertise, and we'll come up with even better ways to support Sarah, Rachael, Rose, and Van to ensure that Sarah gets her shot at life. Through the process, we'll also enhance our own "shot at life."

Summary

What will the year 2000 be like for Sarah as she enters kindergarten in her neighborhood school? Will the brick walls be impregnable, or will the open doors be welcoming? Will Sarah's identity across ecological environments primarily be "the little girl with Down syndrome" or will it be "Sarah – the daughter, the sister, the niece, the cousin, the granddaughter, the neighbor, the friend, the Brownie, the swimmer, the playmate, the "ham", the student, the citizen? Will Sarah truly have her "shot in life" as a full citizen of her community, or will she experience second-class citizenship? Will her life be characterized primarily by formal services and inter-agency coordination or by formal and informal supports and inter-community resources? Many of the traditional services for young children with disabilities and their families have pointed to one type of existence, but Group Action Planning holds a whole different promise for Sarah, her family, and all families who choose to develop reliable alliances and synergistic communities. As Mike Ruef, a member of an Action Group that has been ongoing for several years, commented:

As Americans, we are raised to be independent and self-sufficient. What we often don't realize (in my case I was over 35 before I realized it) is that we need each other;

we need community. While I know some members of the Action Group better than I know others, I have a feeling that I can go to any of them for help, because we are all on the same wavelength. These people are my safety net, my reliable alliance. Although I have been a contributor, Group Action Planning has never felt like an "obligation." Rather, it enriches me and has become an essential part of my life.

(Turnbull & Turnbull, in press).

Relationships are reciprocal. This is a key synergistic and rejuvenating feature of Group Action Planning for Rose and Van, Sarah, Rachael, and every other participant. In fact, Group Action Planning holds promise for "getting a shot at life" for many families.

References

Note: Readers interested in more detailed guidelines for implementing Group Action Planning can contact the Beach Center on Families and Disability at 3111 Haworth Hall, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045.

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